



Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

17 | Printemps 2001
CRITIQUE D'ART 17

Architecture, *Sex and the City*

Nathalie Pierron

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2314>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2314

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2001

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Nathalie Pierron, « Architecture, *Sex and the City* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 17 | Printemps 2001, Online since 08 March 2012, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2314> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2314

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Architecture, Sex and the City

Nathalie Pierron

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Mutations, Barcelone : ACTAR, pour Arc en Rêve centre d'architecture, 2000

10 x 10 : 10 critiques, 100 architectes, trad. Londres : Phaidon, 2001

- 1 In an article about Rem Koolhaas' *S,M,L,XL*, Catherine de Smet¹ described the relationship existing between the appearance and the content of this book, dealing as it does with *Bigness Architecture*, with the help of a judicious transposition of the categories of "duck" and "decorated shed" coined for buildings by Robert Venturi. The recent catalogue for the *Mutations* exhibition, which is less voluminous and above all more colourful, calls these terms to mind, somewhat. So—and to paraphrase her—, "*Mutations* is a book", or rather still a book, and even a blatant example of a "rag" of a book. Actually, it is a handbook of Net architecture more than a manual of architecture, period, and as such it is a compilation of an interesting collection of analysis on the "*Simcity*", where much of the *Mutations* exhibition takes place—to hell with the other! With its mouse-pad cover, the book furthermore beseeches its readers in a most direct way to betake themselves to this present-day virtual city. In the end of the day, by playing on a dissemination of their show in the form of events, as well as on an unprecedented (for an architectural exhibition) range of concepts and communication tools, Arc en Rêve and Mister Big have wagered even their catalogue on this "info-structure", which weaves the fabric of our society, and on its marketing methods. For example, this very trendy combination of critical formulation and apparently scientific mapping, punctuated by slogans that are dealt with in an advertising manner, issues from architecture as an art of branding (p.787). They also give in to the heading "rumours" (in the hands of Hans Ulrich Obrist) in the no less trendy form of exchange, where one or two good jokes are tossed about between "real people" in English, German and Italian. Even the compilation of essays on

politics, cybernetics, and economic and technological complexity has a little vintage side, which those who are all for original versions will certainly appreciate. Readers are then surprised to see the victorious emergence from all this paraphernalia, as from its communicational aesthetics, of a handful of amazing aerial photographs taken by Alex S. MacLean, snippets of anticipated translations of Net-Theory, major efforts to historically and economically contextualize the urban globalization in progress (in Europe, in the Americas, in China and in Africa), and lastly a symbolic questioning—something almost unhoped-for at Harvard—of the contemporary promotion of shopping to sacred status. Wasn't that indeed the essence?

- 2 Basically, "Junkspace", that contemporary architectural space which Mister Big describes for us as "contaminated" and "perverted" (p.743-757) does not *instantly* point to the obsolescence of urban thinking, nor does it mean *as of now* the end of architecture and architects. "Merzville" and "Generic City", fine, but not "Junkspace" yet. This in particular is what McKenzie Wark is on about when he talks of "resurrection" (p.36), what Mister Big is on about (in person) when he describes AMO—the research cell of OMA, Rem Koolhaas's Office of Metropolitan Architecture—as the place where he offers himself, with Harvard, a new "innocence" (p.115), and what Rem Koolhaas himself is on about (repeat) when he imagines the "renewal of the architect's profession" by way of the "observation and theorization of emergent [urban] conditions" as represented by *Mutations* (p.309). The surprising mystification of the *ordinary* Asian architect that follows, and above all the reasons put forward—his unrivalled ability to erase history—may obviously bring smiles to certain faces. The comeback of the great repressed? The last, well-dispatched "stimulant"? (cf. p.160). The *tabula rasa* is still the favourite concept of the great mister, among those it hits (and they are legion)—competition *oblige*?—with copyrights. "Picturesque"? Beware: this term, too, is followed by a ©! With a wink or not, and cynical or otherwise, at a return in force of the author into the world where pioneers are being once again feted. Rem Koolhaas knows that tomorrow's struggles will be more legal than political. He also knows that each day we are living a bit more as if in a film where everything is being done to satisfy us. So why all this *schize* and paranoia? Fear of the OPA?²
- 3 "Eloquent visionary of his generation" is precisely the subtle way people have chosen to deal with him in *10 x 10*, a collection of 100 "outstanding new architects", authors of projects which are themselves "innovative" and "ground-breaking", brought together by ten international critics—and now available in French. Oddly enough, while the London Architectural Association has a major place in this book, only Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper still refer to Rem Koolhaas' books among the ten references intended to add an additional perspective ("cultural and intellectual") to the presentation of their selection. The explanation for this might lie in Terence Riley's essay (he is Chief Curator of the MoMA Department of Architecture)—with each of the ten critics explaining his selection in clear enough terms. There may well be tendencies and movements other than European (Californian, Japanese, etc), yet it would also seem to be a fact that after thirty years of discussion about form, the visual criterion—whose latest outburst came to the fore with the "box versus blob" (*sic*) quarrel—is well on the way to being ousted once and for all by other criteria. As more topical, but no less expected (since Archilab, and the last Venice Biennale), they have to do with connection and teams, where "authority", to borrow Jaime Salazar's terms, has become "ridiculous", no less. Farewell, Mister Big!

- 4 Topology, complexity, flexibility, elasticity, texture, fluidity, liquidity, interactivity, 4D, reversion, and acuity are the new conceptual udders from which the critics of *10 x 10* certainly take their fill, the bulk of them Anglo-Saxon. Informed by *nature* about “trans-modern” technological sensuality, Neil Spiller (Director of the Bartlett School in London) represents what we might call “the cream” with his selection (Lab, D’ECOi, Novak etc.). In his list of references, Spiller nevertheless makes unexpected mention of Ian Gibson’s biography of Salvador Dali (*The Shameful Life of SD*, London: Faber & Faber, 1998). This bibliographical mention goes hand in hand with the following comment: “This is the standard biography of Salvador Dali, in my view one of, if not the, greatest of 20th century artists. Gibson shows how Dali’s sexuality influences the essence of his work and writings”. In Bordeaux, for *Mutations*, François Chaslin also achieved the considerable feat of getting Rem Koolhaas to own up to his kinship with “the way of analysing things” adopted by... Salvador Dali. The Mister Bigs of this world clearly pass on through, but sex stays in the city.
-

NOTES

1. “Je suis un livre”, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne* (Paris), n°68, summer 1999, pp. 95-111.
2. OPA (not to be muddled with O.P.A., which means a takeover bid) is the male equivalent of OMA (which, before meaning “Office For Metropolitan Architecture” simply meant “grandmother” in Dutch).